


# Women and Girls: A Sound Investment

Some of you have asked, “Why should we focus on women and girls? Why shouldn’t we focus on empowering everyone — women and girls, men and boys?” It’s a good question. The answer is because a gap exists between the opportunities and resources available to men and boys and those available to women and girls.


For every year of secondary schooling a  girl receives, her earning power increases by 15-25 percent

According to the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID), 1 in 3 girls around the world will experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, 1 in 5 girls in the developing world who enroll in primary school never finish, and 1 in 7 girls in the developing world are forced into marriage before their 15th birthdays.

A girl’s situation does not improve with age. According to the [World Health Organization](#), complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally. According to the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), women own just between 10 and 20 percent of the world’s land, despite making up more than 40 percent of its agricultural labor force. And according to [USAID](#), women-owned enterprises make up as little as 10 percent of all businesses in Africa.

Whether in the classroom, the hospital or the office, women and girls face challenges unique to their gender. The good news is that even a small investment in a woman or a girl can have a huge return.

## **When Women Succeed, Society Succeeds**

Women make up nearly 64 percent of  Rwanda’s Chamber of Deputies and nearly 39 percent of Rwanda’s Senate. Many credit women’s political participation in Rwanda with helping the country recover from its civil war.


Investing in women and girls means taking actions — big and small — to bring about gender equality. It means changing society’s attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls. It means rethinking the roles and responsibilities of women and girls. It means creating a world where women and girls enjoy the same human rights and have access to the same opportunities as men and boys.

Investing in women and girls isn’t just the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do. Here are some benefits investing in women and girls can have:

**Stronger democracies.** Women’s participation in politics has tangible gains for democracy. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Not only that, it also found that higher rates of women’s

political participation are associated with lower levels of government corruption.

**Improved public service delivery.** Including women in the political space has benefits for citizens, too, because women are more likely to invest in the public good than their male counterparts. In India, for example, USAID found that political districts with more female representatives enjoyed greater community benefits such as investments in drinking water facilities and roadways.

By including women in the peacekeeping  process, countries ensure more lasting and just outcomes following conflict.

**Enhanced food security.** The FAO estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. That would be enough to feed an additional 150 million people.

**More lasting peace.** When women play a role in conflict situations, they become drivers of reconciliation and reconstruction. Evidence shows that including women in conflict-related decisionmaking and peace-building efforts can lead to more durable, comprehensive and widely accepted peace agreements.

**Greater economic growth.** According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP will grow on average by 3 percent. And a girl's individual earning power increases by 15–25 percent for every year of secondary schooling she receives.

These are just a few ways investing in women and girls enables a community, a country and a continent to flourish.

## What's Next?

As Secretary Kerry said, “No country can succeed unless every citizen is empowered to contribute to its future. And no peace can endure if women are not afforded a central role.”

So over the next month, commit to investing in women and girls. It can be something as simple as reading a book to your younger sister or as elaborate as hosting a series of financial literacy workshops for women in your community. The goal is to act and, through your actions, bring about a more equal, prosperous and secure world for everyone.

Think of the impact the YALI Network could make if all 130,000 of you act.

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# To Achieve Equality, First Lady Wants to 'Shake Things Up'

Africa's future lies with women who run businesses, girls who attend university and "leaders like you," U.S. first lady Michelle Obama told young Africans attending the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Summit in Washington.

"Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential," she said to the gathering of Africa's future leaders.

"When we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. ... That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school," she stated.

The first lady noted that girls who are educated earn higher wages, are more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse, and have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

She recalled that while neither of her parents had gone to university, "they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could."

"That's what should drive us all — the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. ... So many of you are already doing that."

Photo credit: AP Images



The first lady called on the men at the summit and others in the YALI Network to tell all the men they know "that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal." She implored them "to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons."

She called on women at the summit and in YALI — some of whom may have disappointed their families by postponing marriage in order to get an education — to help others to do the same.

Obama told the group that when they face obstacles and resistance in their work goals to remember the words of the man for whom their fellowship is now named — the late South African leader Nelson Mandela:

"It always seems impossible until it is done."

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# Youth Will Build Future for Zimbabwe

YALI Network member Charmaine Picardo is a staunch advocate for sexual and reproductive rights. She hopes to establish a think tank in Zimbabwe for youth that addresses topics like women's rights and civic involvement.

"I want the think tank to be comprised of young people because we are going to inherit the country," she said.

Selected as a Washington Fellow, the young Zimbabwean wants to learn how she can raise funds to support projects in her areas of interest, which include the rights of homeless women.

Picardo stresses that she doesn't want to "wait for solutions that come from outside the country or from other people who may not fully be in touch with what is currently going on in Zimbabwe."

During her fellowship studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Picardo also wants to learn how to effectively combine media and arts with advocacy to push for social change and community development.

"I hope to document young people's stories, challenges and solutions," she said. "The media is such a strong communication tool, and now with social media we can reach far and wide."

Currently a second-year student at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, Picardo became an on-air voice at age 17 on the popular television show *Ndeipi Gen'a*, which focuses on youth activism and development. From 2011 to 2012 she wrote about reproductive rights for the *Herald Cool Lifestyle* newspaper, and in 2012 she worked as a community arts educator for the Arts Lab, a project targeted at youth.

In 2012 and 2013, Picardo was involved in drafting a constitution for Zimbabwe, and in 2013 she served as an election observer.

The youth want to learn "what is happening globally and get a chance to catch up on global trends," she said.

"We [Washington Fellows] will share and apply the knowledge we will acquire with other people in our countries as well as mentor others and actively participate in various areas to foster development."

**Photo credit: U.S. Embassy Harare**

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# Generation Good

A generation plans to change the world. Millennials — or 18- to 29-year-old Americans — are anxious to get jobs, but given a choice, they favor jobs they figure might make the world a better place. They grew up in the digital age, making them well aware of the world's problems.

Today's university students, especially, have a do-gooder mission, and fulfilling that mission is more important to them than having children or a prestigious career, acquiring wealth or becoming community leaders, according to Cliff Zukin, professor of political science at Rutgers University. Their sensibility is sure to affect how businesses operate because, by 2020, millennials will make up nearly half the workforce.

"My generation has been imbued with a sense of responsibility," said millennial Allison McGuire of the Companies for Good blog. "We grew up learning that our actions directly affect our communities." As workers, millennials hope to nudge their employers to take responsibility for employees, for society and for the world, she said.

But millennials are not idealistic fools. According to a 2012 survey conducted by Zukin for Net Impact, an advocacy group, the recession of the late 2000s made the millennial generation care about survival in the labor market more than anything else, including their change-the-world aspirations. Job security and a good work/life balance surpass their altruistic desires.

Still, Zukin argues, that is "quite unusual for those in their early 20s, who are supposed to be so self-confident and entrepreneurial." As the economy improves, he believes, the younger generation will re-focus on making a difference and seek jobs allowing them to do that.

**Photo Credit: [Women's Technology Empowerment Centre/Flickr](#)**

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